Sex and Other Changes

David Nobbs

1 Two Different Uses for Trees

People were shocked when it all happened. Afterwards, though, they claimed that they hadn't been surprised. That is so very Throdnall. The town's main products are railway carriages and hindsight.

'I always thought there was something not quite right about that marriage,' commented an osteopath's wife in the Warwick Bar of the Cornucopia Hotel in Brindley Street.

Where does the story of Nick and Alison Divot begin? In the womb, Alison would say, but we won't go back that far. Too much speculation and not enough action.

In childhood, then? Certainly Alison felt that her childhood was deeply significant. Her mum had told her, so many times, oh so many times till she was sick of it, how, when she was two, at tea, at Granny Huddersfield's, she had said, 'Why haven't I got a willy like the other boys?' How everyone had laughed. 'I wish I was a boy' became fourth in her top twenty childhood sayings, behind, 'Mummy, I'm bored', 'My tummy hurts' and 'Are we nearly there?'

Marge had never seen anything particularly significant in that remark at Granny Huddersfield's. She wouldn't have told the story if she had. Even Alison didn't realise its full signi- ficance. 'I wish I was a boy.' Well, a child has many wishes, a child has many heartaches and disappointments and learns to live with them, and Alison never said, 'I'm going to be a boy when I grow up.'

They weren't well off. Her father, Bernie, was a guard on the railways, and they lived on the wrong side of the tracks in the South Yorkshire town of Thurmarsh. Marge 'did' for a couple of families on the posher side of the town. She cycled to work.

They had two daughters. Alison was the elder by two years, and ruled Jen with a rod of iron. Alison was brighter than Jen. Jen was prettier than Alison. All the motives for civil war were there.

Jen was blonde, gorgeous, delicate, fluffy, self-righteous and devious, with the attention span of a hyper-active newt. Alison was dark, intense, passionate, tough, rough, gruff, hot-tempered, straightforward and an utter

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tomboy. Her greatest pleasure in life was hitting Jen. When her mother rebuked her, she retorted indignantly, 'But, Mum, that's what sisters are for.'

Alison believed herself to be utterly charmless. Tall, gawky, awkward, she was all of these, but no, she was not charmless. She loved the theatre, appeared in all the school plays. Her charm was in the passion in her eyes as she brought other people to life. Of course she was often cast in the male parts, to her mother's fury. 'Why couldn't Andrea Houseman have played Richard the Third? She's got a hump already.' Her charm was in the toss of her head as she climbed the scratty trees that lined the River Rundle. Her charm was in her honesty.

How lucky that her mother didn't 'do' for the Divots, in genteel, middle-class Upcot Avenue. How could Nick have fallen for his charlady's daughter?

Nick was an only child. His father, like Alison's, was in transport, but his transport was the stuff of Bernie's dreams. Daniel Divot was a purser on the cruise ships. Barbara Divot hated the sea. Nick was a mother's boy.

Nick and Alison saw each other once, actually, when they were both aged eight. It was a lovely summer's day. An artist had dotted the sky with just the right number of puffy white clouds. There was no breeze at all in the Divot garden, and just a faint zephyr up on the top of the sycamore that Alison had climbed. She had trespassed into the garden of the house next to the Divots. Nobody in Thurmarsh was better than Alison Kettlewell at climbing trees. She stood right at the top, like an overgrown stork, holding on with one hand. She was Queen Boadicea. She scanned the horizon for enemy troops. Nothing. The only person she could see was a thin, sandy-haired child in the next door garden, who was doing something very earnest and very boring with a book. She gave a great cheery holler and saw the child jump.

Nick was just about to press an oak leaf into a notebook when the holler startled him. He looked up and saw Alison. His eyes widened in amazement. He waved. To his horror she waved back so vigorously that she almost fell, clutched the top branch, and swung on it so violently that it seemed it must break. He was terrified that she would fall and he would have to do something. She wasn't frightened at all. Gradually, she regained her equilibrium, but not before he had broken out in a fine sweat.

A homing pigeon, en route from Hyde Park to Featherstone, flew past Alison. She reached as if to grab it, and gave a bloodcurdling yell. Startled, it shat itself. A white stream descended into the Divot garden and fell plop all over the cover of Nick's notebook, on which he had written, in a careful childish hand, blissfully unaware of his spelling mistake, 'Thurmarsh and Evnirons – Summer 1964'.

The pigeon flew on, unaware of the tenuous initial link it had provided for the unusual love story of Nick and Alison.

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Nick spent much of his childhood reading. His mother thought that he was literary, but he read because he preferred other people's lives to his own. His favourite book was Tess of the D'Urbevilles. He was drawn to its miseries like a gambler to the tables. He read it eleven times. His mother disapproved; she wanted him to read different books, she found his obsession unhealthy, so he had to read it in secret, which added to its appeal.

'Nick,' she said one day, 'I hope you aren't reading Tess again.'

'Of course I'm not,' he lied.

'You should find a real girl to be friends with.'

He looked at her in astonishment. How could somebody as experienced as a grown-up get something as wrong as that?

He had the sense not to tell her that he didn't keep reading the book because he loved Tess, that he read it because he was Tess.

He always used his father's postcards as bookmarks. 'I was so sad you weren't beside me as we steamed into the heart of Venice. Your trip to Filey sounded fun.'

It's hardly surprising that he was a late developer. One speech day, when he was sixteen . . . 'I'll be with you in spirit, old son. I'll think of you as I hunt out a little trinket for your mother in the souks' . . . as he was walking towards the hall with his embarrassingly overdressed mother, they overheard a boy say, 'Nick's so retarded he thinks Wanking is a town in China.' He met his mother's eye and blushed. 'I always was bad at geography,' he said. He had no idea whether she'd understood. He had no idea about anything, really.

Three weeks later, in the last week of term, he met Alison properly.

A fine summer's evening in Thurmarsh. In the cricket pavilion there was a meeting of the Thurmarsh Grammar School Bisexual Humanist Society, to debate the rather ambitious proposition 'Is unselfishness impossible?'

Nick's friend Prentice, a thickset, plump youth with a round face, had urged him to join. As they'd approached the pavilion for the first time, Nick had said, 'What am I doing here? Why are you bringing me here?'

'I want you to speak,' said Prentice. 'I want you to take part. I want to draw you out of yourself.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm your friend. Incidentally, it's about time you called me by my Christian name.'

'What is your Christian name?'

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'Prentice.'

'Well, it'll be just the same as calling you by your surname.'

'It won't. I'll know. Will you do it, Nick?'

'All right then . . . Prentice.'

'Thank you.'

There were usually fewer than twenty people at these meetings. Nick had hated the first one, which had been on the subject 'Can tests on animals be justified?' He had been frightened that he would dare to speak. He had been trying to force himself to speak. He had only just failed – several times. It had been terrifying.

Gradually, however, through 'Should smoking be banned?', 'Does Socialism kill initiative?', 'Is philosophy a waste of time?' and 'Is marriage before sex too risky?' he had bravely come to terms with the fact that he would never dare to speak, and there was no need for him to dare to speak, and he had begun to enjoy sitting there anonymously in the pavilion with its faint unthreatening aroma of the stale sweat of generations of jockstraps.

Sometimes he would allow himself to dream that he was at the girls' school, that after the debate he would wander off with Prentice and they would . . . well, he could never bring himself to use the actual words even to himself. He had to be so careful, he thought, not to reveal any hint of this to Prentice, or he might lose the only friend he had.

On this occasion, however, Nick didn't have time to dream. He was entirely taken up with Alison. She spoke fluently, confidently, loudly, as if to a vast crowd that only she could see. She insisted that unselfishess was possible. True, she hadn't met any of it in her life, and none of it among her friends, but she gave examples of her own unselfishness as proof of the absurdity of the proposition.

Her speech did not go down well. Later speakers offered other motives for her apparently unselfish actions. Nick didn't care. It wasn't what she said that impressed him. It was how she said it. It was what she was.

He felt that she was speaking directly to him. He recognised that her confidence was bluster. He realised that her conceit was grown out of self-disgust. He knew that she was as lonely as he was, that she was as awkward with herself as he was with himself, that they were soul-mates. It wasn't love. It wasn't even sexual attraction. It was compatibility at first sight.

After she had spoken, he began to plan what he would say to her after the meeting: 'You were magnificent', 'You can inspire me to total unselfishness', 'I thought you were marvellous about the shortcomings of the rest of the world', 'I do totally agree about the awfulness of humanity', 'Your cynicism is excessive. I will prove it by being as unselfish as you', 'Would you like a milk shake?', 'Where have you been all my life?', 'Where have I been all your life?',

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'Would you like to come and see my pressed ferns?', 'Have you read Tess of the D'Urbevilles?', 'My dad could get us on a Mediterranean cruise if you're interested', 'I don't suppose you'd fancy coming to my friend's father's camp site near Filey?' All were tried, weighed up, placed in a constantly varying order of possibility.

And then the meeting was over, and she strode out contemptuously, and he had to struggle past Prentice's thick legs and by the time he got out she was already striding away across the outfield of the cricket ground. A low sun made her shadow immensely thin and long.

Nick ran after her but, even though no match was in progress, he couldn't bring himself to walk on the outfield. He scurried round the boundary.

'Hey!' he cried.

She stopped and turned. At that time she was at least three inches taller than he was. He felt over-awed. All his opening gambits, so carefully rated from one to twelve, flew away. He could think of nothing to say. He approached her slowly. She stood there, mercilessly. In the nets, a ball thudded into a batsman's box. Behind them some wag had arranged the scoreboard to read 'Home Team 1176 for 2. Last man 617.'

His mouth was dry. His tongue was sticking to the side of his cheek. He found it almost impossible to speak at all.

He only spoke three words, and it's ironic to realise, with the hindsight for which Throdnall is so famous, that his statement, so apparently simple, was actually something in which he had no confidence, something which he didn't believe to be entirely true even then.

'Hello,' he said. 'I'm Nick.'

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